

SB 516 - Cannabis - Favorable with Amendments

To: The Honorable Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee

From: Elvis Karegeya, Care Consultant
Zen Leaf Germantown

My name is Elvis Karegeya and I have been a resident in Germantown for 5 years. I have worked in the cannabis industry for about 6 years and currently serve as a care consultant at Zen Leaf Germantown. I have worked at Zen Leaf for about 3 years but before that I was employed by its parent company Verano in Jessup as part of their packaging department.

I am writing today to express my support for SB-516 legislation that would set regulations in adult-use cannabis and to call on the legislature to ensure that Labor Peace Agreements provisions are included in the legislation. In my 6 years in the industry, I have seen it grown exponentially in every aspect. From the number of dispensaries to the amount of products, from the number of facilities to the amount of employees. We have also seen its growth financially in the medical market which is an indication of how much more it will be during adult-use. Another observation is a lot of the companies in the Maryland market are coming from out of state with business models from a previous state. Over the years as the industry has grown, I've noticed the voice of the employees has also grown smaller, and seeing as most of the employees will be Maryland residents and serving Maryland residents I believe their voices and/or ability to have a voice should be protected.

Zen Leaf Germantown employees have managed to Unionize. This was very important to me because I finally felt like I had a voice that would be heard. I transferred from the parent company to the dispensary and was promised yearly evaluations and raises based off performance. I received an evaluation two and a half years later after requesting it and was denied a raise because it wasn't part of the budget. All the promises that were made were verbal, which is why I consider the union necessary. I wanted to be able to hold the company accountable in writing (contractually) for promises made to the employees. These agreements also hold the employee accountable. An employer would also benefit more from learning about the employee's needs and making sure they are working together to address them.

Having an LPA in place would have been very beneficial for our employees. Our inability to openly and comfortably discuss what it would take to unionized elongated the process. The fear of losing one's ability to make a living should not exist when employees want to create a better work environment.

The lack of an LPA lead to a low turnout when we voted for the union, but we luckily managed to win our union. If we had an LPA in place I believe we would have been able to discuss the benefits more openly and also explain how to vote and make sure it counts. Some people never received ballots and weren't able to effectively communicate their problem because some employees were nervous about even talking about the union.

I believe LPAs are incredibly important for all future Maryland employees in this industry. There is no doubt in the future success of the cannabis industry, and we must look to protect not just the people the start these businesses but also the workers who staff these businesses. Their success should be our success, and cannabis jobs should be sustainable for Maryland cannabis workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today. Once again, I call on the legislature to vote YES to include Labor Peace Agreement provisions in adult-use cannabis legislation.